

Asian Americans more affected by pandemic-related unemployment than any other racial group

October 20 2020, by Jon Niccum



Credit: Freestock

While the lockdown associated with COVID-19 has negatively affected

people from all walks of life, one U.S. minority group is bearing the brunt of unemployment.

According to a new study by a quartet of University of Kansas researchers, the pandemic's effect on the [labor market](#) has hit Asian Americans the hardest.

"Usually, Asian Americans are not much affected by any kind of crisis—including an economic crisis—compared to other minorities. This time it looks different," said ChangHwan Kim, KU professor of sociology.

His article titled "COVID-19 and the Decline in Asian American Employment" appears in a forthcoming issue of *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*.

The study—co-written with KU graduate students Andrew Taeho Kim, Scott Tuttle and Yurong Zhang—finds that Asian Americans are "more negatively affected by the lockdown than any other [racial group](#), net of education, immigration status and other covariates." The effect is particularly significant on less-educated Asian Americans. Regardless of gender, this subset is substantially more likely to lose employment than equally educated white Americans.

Kim's team analyzed Current Population Survey—Merged Outgoing Rotation Group (CPSMORG), a monthly assessment that provides the government with its official employment statistics. They found the lockdown and subsequent mass layoffs in its wake adversely affected less-educated workers more than higher-educated workers.

Because Asian Americans are more likely to possess a bachelor's or graduate degree than any other racial group, it's assumed they might hold immunity to drops in employment. However, they not only suffered the

greatest percentage of overall job losses, but among the less-educated group, they lost at-work status after the pandemic at a 9.7 percentage point higher than white workers. By comparison, the gap between white and Black workers is only 1.8 percentage point.

Whereas the research dissects the "what" and "how" of this situation, the "why" presented a challenge for Kim's team.

"We don't know exactly why it's the case," he said.

"At first we thought the connection was many Asian Americans work in the restaurant industry or other service industries. We thought it involved industry and occupation, but that was not so."

He narrowed the reasons for this decline to two possibilities. One is self-selection, meaning they voluntarily chose to leave their jobs.

"Compared to other racial groups, Asian Americans are more keenly aware of the danger of this virus. It first affected people in China, then spread to Korea. So Asian Americans know the danger because they hear from relatives in these countries. Maybe there's additional concern in their community," he said.

More-educated workers can do jobs from home and comfortably isolate from other segments of society. For the less-educated, it's not so easy to do. Typically, their jobs involve manual labor and/or contact with people.

"Also, Asian American customers are more concerned about the virus, so they are less likely to go to Asian American restaurants or grocery stores," he said. "Then people who are employees of those restaurants need to be laid off. This is not their own self-selection but because of customer behaviors that hit this ethnic economy hard."

The other possibility is discrimination.

Kim said, "For the well-educated workers, they are relatively more secure. But for the less-educated workers, it's actually easier to discriminate. If you look at what happened to African Americans before the pandemic, usually less-educated workers are more discriminated against in the market."

President Donald Trump has repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" and the "kung flu," despite accusations of bigotry and inaccuracy that accompany this term.

"This creates a hostile environment. The FBI has reported that [hate crimes](#) against Asian Americans have increased dramatically because of this," Kim said.

Fortunately, these grim unemployment numbers may soon see a statistical rebound.

"My guess is it will get better," said Kim, who's taught at KU for 12 years, where the labor market is his focus of studies.

"If the economy is going out of recession next year, the job market for Asian Americans may come back close to normal. Of course, when you're coming back to normal, it looks like a big improvement ... but really it's just coming back to the previous situation."

More information: Andrew Taeho Kim et al. COVID-19 and the Decline in Asian American Employment, *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.rssm.2020.100563](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2020.100563)

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Asian Americans more affected by pandemic-related unemployment than any other racial group (2020, October 20) retrieved 28 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2020-10-asian-americans-affected-pandemic-related-unemployment.html>

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